A photo essay, or picture story, is a photographer’s way of showing a more complete story than is possible with one image. It is a collection of images that work together to tell a story. Generally, there are between 5 and 15 images, although more or less images are sometimes appropriate.Sometimes these images have captions, other times they do not. While there are no concrete rules for how photo essays must be created, there are several common ways that a photo essay can be developed.

* **Time Sequence**
Time sequence is the very beginning of a photo essay. Photo essays began as photographers began showing a sequence of photos to chronicle an event. This is often like looking at a series of still images from a movie. This type of photo essay is best used where there is an obvious path of time. Illustrations of linear events in compact areas such as cliff diving, fire fighting, and a bird hatching are all examples of this type of photo essay.

Time sequence photo essays can also be expanded to cover longer amounts of time in less compact areas. These essays have much larger gaps of time between images than do basic time sequence essays. Concepts such as police chases from crime to capture or a life from birth to death can be covered in this type of essay.
* **Location**
Location photo essays seek to capture the feel of a location through glimpses of people and places within a set location. Locations can be compact such as a school or garden, or vast such as a country. This type of photo essay is often non-linear from a chronological standpoint but does not have to be non-linear. Location essays often start at one physical point and travel outward, much like a tour of the area in question would progress.
* **Idea**
Idea essays often feature very diverse images that all have a common thread of one theme or idea. Topics such as hope, love, and work can be covered under idea essays. Because idea essays do often feature diverse subjects it is a good idea to have a common thread travel through the images. Using a common prop or following a color scheme can help to visually bond the images together. For example, a photo essay on breast cancer might use the familiar pink ribbon symbol in the form of a pink headscarf worn by a subject in each image to tie the set together. Or an essay on work might tie images together by flowing commonality. That means the first image might be a ditch digger with a restaurant in the background. The second image would then be a cook. From there the third image might continue the food service theme and show a waiter serving the meal to a man in a nice suit. The fourth image could then pick up on the customer in the previous image and move to a lawyer in a courtroom. Each image suggests the next.
* **Event**
Event essays tend to incorporate ideas from the other categories. Event essays cover a specific happening (such as a building fire or a wedding) but are not bound to a specific method of image sequence. Many event essays follow a time sequence outline but some are more fluid in their presentation. Event essays should at least show the major parts critical to the event. For example, a wedding essay without a bride or groom would not be complete.

Like any art, photo essays have basic guidelines but some very successful pieces deviate drastically from the “normal” rules. A photo essay basically puts a photographer in a director’s chair. The story is there, the photographer must creatively decide how to best convey the story to others.